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Backhill / Peking / Beijing

by
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Backhill / Peking / Beijing

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The three main contributing factors to the discrepancy between Peking and Beijing are: 1. a plethora of romanizations, 2. a welter of local pronunciations, and 3. phonological change over time. Let us examine these factors one by one.

One of the banes of Sinology (there are too many to recount in a brief essay such as this which focuses on a single, specific topic) is that there is a surfeit of competing phonetic transcriptions of Modern Standard Mandarin, not to mention the other Sinitic (sometimes called Han) languages or, even less, the non-Sinitic languages of China. The two main systems currently used in the English-speaking world are that known as Wade-Giles and another known as Pinyin. The former, devised by two English scholars over a century ago, is favored by those who study traditional China and remains the standard in virtually all of our major East Asian libraries. The latter, which means simply "spelling" and is the official alphabetical orthography sponsored by the government of the People's Republic, naturally tends to be used more by those who study and write about contemporary China. Identical sounds in the spoken language may look quite dissimilar when written in the various romanizations. For example, *Pei-ching* in Wade Giles and *Beijing* in Pinyin are both intended to represent the Modern Standard Mandarin (hereafter MSM) pronunciation of the name of the capital of China.

For those who wish to learn to pronounce *Pei-ching* or *Beijing* correctly, the first syllable sounds like American "bay" with a very low, dipping tonal contour and the second syllable is like the first syllable of "jingle" with a high, level tone: *bǎy-jīng*. One should not be overly anxious about the correct intonation of the two syllables because it is very hard to get them just right and, furthermore, people from the various districts of China articulate them quite differently anyway even when trying to approximate MSM. If the consonants and vowels are close to accurate, context will make clear that one is referring to the capital of the country.

This leads to one of the greatest conceptual difficulties in dealing with Chinese (or Sinitic) languages, namely the fact that there is not just one of them. There is a pervasive myth that all one billion plus Chinese speak MSM. Nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, there are scores of so-called "minority nationalities" living within the territory of China, such as the Uighurs, the Zhuang, the Tibetans, the Miao, the Yao, and the Yi, whose languages do not even belong to the Sinitic language group. Among Sinitic languages, there are at least seven or eight major branches that are mutually unintelligible. These are often erroneously referred to as "dialects" through mistranslation of the Chinese term *fangyan* ("topolect," i.e. language of a place). Even within the seven or eight major branches, there is enormous variety. For example, although individuals from rural Yinchuan in the northern part of Ningsia, from the hills to the west of Chengtu and Chungking in Szechwan, and from the countryside along the Mekong and Salween Rivers in southwestern Yunnan near the Burmese border are all said to speak Mandarin, it is often extremely difficult for them to make any sense of what each other is saying.

One of the causes for this obfuscation concerning Sinitic languages is the fact that there is only a single Sinitic script, normally referred to by the quaint expression "Chinese characters," but better designated by the English equivalent of the native term *fangkuaizi* ("tetragraphs," i.e. square-shaped graphs). It is often falsely assumed that, because there is only one Sinitic script, there is accordingly only one Sinitic language. According to this logic, Turkish, Latin, Zhuang, English, Vietnamese, Czech, Tagalog, German, French, Italian, etc. are all the same language because they all use the same Roman letters. Of course, that is nonsense, for a script does not a language make but is only a tool for writing down languages.

In point of fact, most Sinitic languages have never been recorded in any script, certainly not in tetragraphs. Attempts have been made to write Cantonese and Taiwanese, but they have not been very successful because it is hard to find appropriate tetragraphs for all the morphemes (irreducible units of meaning). The only functioning scripts for many non-standard Sinitic languages (e.g. Amoy and Ningpo) have been almost exclusively romanized alphabets. When we

talk about Chinese written in tetragraphs, we intend primarily two basic types, *wenyan* ("literary language," i.e. Classical Chinese) and *guanhua* ("the speech of the officials," i.e. Mandarin which is also called by many different names in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, and overseas communities). The former is a dead language in the sense that it has not been "sayable" for at least two millennia and may well never have been used for conversational purposes. The latter is an artificial language because it was never securely tied to the living language of any given locale but was rather a means which permitted mandarins from various topolectal regions to carry on discussions. Since the twenties and thirties of this century, however, MSM has been strenuously promoted -- with mixed results -- by both the Nationalists and the Communists as a form of common speech for private citizens as well. The pronunciation of Mandarin varied according to the shifting location of the capital throughout history. Its vocabulary and grammar were a combination of features borrowed from the topolects (mostly those in the north) as well as from various stages and styles of Classical Chinese. Still today, MSM is basically a book language in that it is fully writable in tetragraphs, whereas speakers of Sinitic languages often employ terms and expressions that it is impossible to transcribe accurately with tetragraphs. Even in Pekingese, which is supposedly the closest model for MSM, there are literally hundreds of words in the daily language that cannot be written with assurance in tetragraphs.

Chinese tetragraphs are a unique script in the modern world, their nearest cousins being Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian pictographs, both of which passed out of existence a couple of thousand years ago. As they have developed today, the tetragraphs are definitely not pictographs, ideographs, or logographs, labels that are still constantly applied to them and which are the source of much confusion regarding the script. The tetragraphs cannot be said to be pictographs, ideographs, or logographs for the simple reason that they are not pictures, do not indicate ideas, and do not function as words. Except for a few extremely rare, unsanctioned oddities, the tetragraphs are all one syllable long when read out. Therefore, they cannot be logographs ("word signs") because the average length of a Chinese (MSM) word today is almost exactly two syllables. Similarly, there are no tetragraphs which in their current form visually convey an idea (except, perhaps, those for the first three cardinal numbers) or depict an object with sufficient transparency that an untrained individual can readily decipher them, hence the script cannot be designated as ideographic or pictographic. Even in the earliest period of its development, the script was not made up solely of ideographs or pictographs.

The vast majority of Chinese tetragraphs convey both sound and meaning, but neither with full precision. For instance, the tetragraph used to write the word for "vinegar" (*cu*, pronounced *ts'oo*), consists of one component roughly indicating its sound (read in various other tetragraphs as *xi*, *ji*, *jie*, *qiao*, *cuo*, and *zha*) and another component roughly indicating meaning ("spirits made from newly harvested millet in the eighth month," i.e. something fermented).

Because the tetragraphs are not a phonetic script, they can be read in numerous radically different ways. Contrary to the widespread opinion that the tetragraphs have been a key instrument for the cohesiveness of Chinese society, this is probably one of the main reasons why Han languages have never become unified. Thus, the tetragraph for "fish" is pronounced *yü*, *ngeü*, *ngyie*, *ngyi*, *jui*, *hu*, *hi*, *hui*, *ngü*, and so on in different parts of China. Since only a very small and elite group had the leisure both to acquire Mandarin and to master the incredibly complicated tetragraphs (thousands of them, each with an average of over a dozen brush strokes, are required for literacy), the writing system actually served to prevent the local languages of the broad populace from gradual assimilation to a national standard.

We should not imagine that all of the citizens of China pronounce the two tetragraphs that make up the name of the Chinese capital in the same manner. Instead, we find people from Canton saying Pakking, people from Meih sien saying Petkin, people from Amoy saying Pokking, people from Swatow saying Pakkiã, people from Fuchow saying Pœyqking, and people from Shanghai and Suchow saying Paqchin. It is curious that all of these pronunciations resemble our Peking more than they do MSM Beijing. In truth, this is no mere accident or manifestation of backward vulgarity. It is due, on the contrary, to a pattern of linguistic evolution that can be described and dated fairly accurately.

This leads us to a consideration of the third contributing factor to the discrepancy between Peking and Beijing, namely, phonological change. To pursue this topic to its earliest phases, we must now embark on a historical excursion which will take us to a period before the invention of the tetragraphs about 1300 Before the International Era (B.I.E.). The ultimate derivations of the two tetragraphs for Peking/Pakking/Petkin/Beijing, etc. that I shall propose forthwith have never before been suggested, but I am confident that the evidence I have assembled is conclusive, at least for the first syllable.

The first tetragraph of Peking/Beijing signifies "north" and the second tetragraph means "capital." Hence, Peking/Beijing literally means "Northern Capital." The city received this name during the Ming dynasty by way of contrast to Nanking/Nanjing which was the "Southern Capital." It had been known under the preceding Yuan (Mongol) dynasty in Chinese as Dadu ("Great Metropolis"), usually transcribed Taitu in historical accounts, and in Turkish as Khanbaligh ("City of the Khan," i.e. "Royal City"), the Cambaluc of Marco Polo. Kublai Khan had established his political base there in 1272. When the Ming took over the reins of imperial authority from the Mongols, they initially (1368) established themselves in Nanking/Nanjing. In 1403 they stated their aim to make Peking/Beijing the capital of their dynasty, by 1409 they had begun preparation for its reoccupation, and by 1420 it was once again capital of the entire realm. It remained so until Chiang Kai-shek/Jiang Jieshi, protégé of Sun Yat-sen/Sun Yixian, moved the capital of the Republic of China back to Nanking/Nanjing in 1928 because of growing Japanese influence in the north and renamed Peking/Beijing as Peiping/Beiping ("Northern Peace") to underscore that it was no longer the seat of government. It is still officially known by that name in Taipei (ostensibly "Terrace North"), regardless of its rededication as the capital of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The oldest form of the tetragraph for "north" 𠂔 depicts two men standing back to back 𠂔. North was the direction to which one turned his back because it was cold. Conversely, one faced the south because it was the direction of warmth. As such, it became a fundamental premise of geomantic siting and the ritual orientation for ceremonial grounds, public buildings, temples, and even private homes. There can be no doubt that the etymology of the Chinese word for "north" (tentatively reconstructed archaic pronunciation *pək*) is intimately related to the word for "back" (tentatively reconstructed archaic pronunciation *bək*). This is also borne out by the tetragraph used to write *bək* which consists of the tetragraph for "north" (viz., two men standing back-to-back) with the addition of a semantic classifier for flesh to specify that it has to do with the body. The latter is a rather late graph, probably first appearing in the small seal script circa third century B.I.E. Because they sounded somewhat the same and were etymologically related, the Chinese words for "back" and "north" were apparently both written with the same tetragraph during the early formation of the script. It was only when written texts became more complex that the need was felt to differentiate them.

Even the least linguistically astute observer will immediately note that the ancient Chinese word for "back" is almost indistinguishable in sound from the English word "back." Is this but sheer coincidence, the extraordinary implications of which we should hastily sweep aside before we become seduced by some grand but preposterous Sino-European consanguinity? I think not.

Within the last few years, maverick scholars have discovered well over a thousand words (such as those for bovine, horse, dog, goose, mosquito, louse, man, chariot, etc.) whose most ancient forms are clearly related in Indo-European and Sinitic languages. Linguistic affiliation has yet to be proven but, at the very least, massive borrowing is undeniable. There can be no question that English "back" and Chinese *bək* are derived from the same etymon. To show that the Modern English word "back" is not just a freak occurrence, it might be helpful to point out that Old Frisian has *bek*; Old Norse, Old Saxon, Low German, Middle Low German, Middle English, and Middle Dutch have *bak* (cf. Danish *bag*); Swedish has the adverb *bak* meaning "behind" which also occurs in compounds for "hind-"; Old English has *bæc*; Middle English has *baccho* or *bahho* ("haunch, ham") which, in all likelihood, gives us our word "bacon"; Old High German has *ba[c]h*; Middle High German and Modern German have *backe* ("buttock"); Modern German has *hinterbacke* ("buttocks" -- beyond the back, as it were); Dutch has *bakboord* ("larboard" or "port side" --

presumably the "back" side for right-handed sailors); and so on.

These linguistic connections have also been confirmed by remarkably careful and detailed archeological studies carried out over the past century that have conclusively demonstrated a late Neolithic, early Bronze Age continuum of culture stretching all the way across the Eurasian steppeland from Northern China to Northern Europe. Perhaps it will turn out that all men (and women) really are brothers (and sisters) after all.

These reflections receive strong confirmation from the Chinese word for "capital" as well. The original meaning of *king/jing* (i.e. the second syllable of Peking/Beijing) was "hill." Like our senators and congressmen who go "up on the hill" to legislate the affairs of our nation or the ancient Greek statesmen who conducted their most important municipal and religious business on the acropolis ("upper city"), the early Chinese were wont to locate the headquarters of their government upon an eminence.¹ This might only be a manmade terrace or platform of pounded earth when there were no suitable natural hills in the vicinity of the capital, but some sort of elevation was essential. This aspect of capital architecture and city planning is still quite obvious in the Forbidden City of Peking where the more important buildings, especially that which houses the throne, are raised high above the surrounding flat spaces. When a tetragraph was created to represent the word for "hill > capital", it showed a building with peaked roof atop an elevation 𡵓 (modern form 京). Already we see a strong affinity between the placement of Sinitic and Indo-European capitals. What is even more astounding is that the English word "hill" and Chinese *king/jing* are almost certainly related. Since the relationship is not so obvious as that between "back" and *pek/bei*, I must ask the forbearance of my kind reader while I marshal a much larger body of data (which is, in truth, only a small portion of the materials collected in my notes on this subject).

The tentative archaic reconstruction of Chinese *king/jing* ("hill > capital") is *kljiang*. The most important letters to note are *k*, *l*, and the suffixed nasal *ng*. Strange as it may seem to those who are innocent of historical linguistics, the Indo-European root of English "hill" is actually reconstructed as *kel* ("to rise; prominence"). From this may be derived the suffixed zero-grade from *kl-ni* which, in turn, yields the hypothetical Germanic root *hulni*. The latter appears in Gothic as *hallus* ("rock, cliff") and in Old Norse as *hallr* ("stone"). Germanic antecedents meaning the same thing as our word "hill" include Old English *hyll*, Frisian *hel*, Middle English *hil* (variants *hul* and *hull*), Middle Dutch *hille* (variants *hil* and *hul*), and Low German *hull*. We may postulate a West German ancestral form *khuni* or *kulnis* for the Low German area. Another Germanic root derived from Indo-European *kel* may be reconstructed as *hulm*. It yields Old Norse *holmr* ("islet rising out of a bay, meadow") which is cognate with Modern British English "holm" ("island in a river") and Old Saxon and Low German *holm* ("hill").

The Greek for "hill," *kolōnōs*, *kolōnē*, is manifestly similar to Old Chinese *kljiang*. The words for "hill" in Latin and its derivations are also clearly linked to the Chinese word, hence Latin *collis* (from a hypothetical *colnis*), Italian *colle*, *collina*, French *colline*, Spanish *colina*, *collado*, and Rumanian *colina*. Words for hill and related terms in Balto-Slavic languages even more closely resemble the Chinese, thus Lithuanian *kilnus* ("high"), *kalnas* ("mountain"), and *kalnelis* ("hill"), Latvian *kalns* ("mountain") and *pakalne* ("hill"), Church Slavonic *chlŭmŭ*, Croatian *hum*, Bohemian *chlum*, and Russian *cholm* (all meaning "hill"). We may also cite the Sanskrit cognate *kūṭam* (for *kultam*) which means "summit, peak, forehead" (cf. Old Church Slavonic *čelo* ["forehead"]).

Now that I have demonstrated the relatedness of Peking/Beijing ("Northern Capital") and "Back Hill," we may move on to an examination of the tremendous linguistic transformations that have resulted in Beijing as opposed to our Peking and Old Chinese *pək-kljiang*. We know that, roughly 1,400 years ago, the latter had become approximately *pək-kiæng* in the official pronunciation of North China. We are even more certain that, in 1324 when Zhou Deqing wrote his *Sounds and Rhymes of the Central Plains*, which provides extensive phonological data for the area surrounding Peking, the tetragraphs for "Northern Capital" were pronounced *pik-king*. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and his fellow Jesuits, who were told by Chinese during the late Ming period that Nanking pronunciation was the prestige Mandarin dialect, romanized the name of the

northern capital as Peking.

Around the middle of the seventeenth century, a whole series of extraordinary phonological and grammatical changes that were taking place in the northern Chinese topolects began to surface. One of these was the so-called palatalization of the velars whereby *g*, *k*, and *h* before the high front vowels *i* and *ü* became *j*, *q*, and *x*. This transformation must have started to occur already in the northeast by about the middle of the seventeenth century, for we find confirmation of it in the Manchu translation of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (1644?). But it did not happen everywhere at the same instant. Indeed, there are still numerous speakers in the north who continue to say Peking instead of Beijing. One of the most notable localities which preserve the old *king* sound over its *jing* replacement is Yentai on the northern coast of the Shantung peninsula, but there are scattered pockets in Henan and elsewhere. Some Hakka, displaced northerners who have been living in the south for many centuries, still persist in saying *king* while others have shifted to *jing*.

The inquisitive layman naturally wants to know why this happened. Most authorities would assert that it was simply a natural language change. Not being satisfied that anything in the universe happens without a cause or concatenation of causes, I feel compelled to seek a reason for these dramatic modifications in the northern topolects. It seems to me that a possible explanation might lie in the protracted influence of Altaic peoples in north China from the beginning of the tenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. The Khitans (907-1125), Tanguts (1032-1227), Jurchens (1115-1234), Mongols (1206-1367), and Manchus (1644-1911) controlled large portions or all of China north of the Yangtze throughout most of the second millennium. The latter two dynasties ruled vast empires that included the whole of China. The deep impact of these non-Sinitic peoples on many facets of Chinese society (institutions, food, music, costume, etc.) can easily be shown. Language, too, was unmistakably affected. Hundreds of well-known Chinese words (as well as the ideas and objects they represented) were adopted from the Tatars and their kin. To name only one example of a more systematic type of change, the Chinese historical linguist, Tang Yu, has assembled abundant evidence which suggests that the rise of the characteristic retroflex suffix (-*r*) of certain northern topolects was due to contact with foreign peoples. I suspect that the diphthongization of the simple vowel in the first syllable of *pik-king* ("Northern Capital") was also due to similar causes since it too is a rather late development and is still restricted almost wholly to the northern topolects. The late Mantaro Hashimoto had begun to develop a theory of the Altaicization of Chinese but unfortunately passed away before he was able to describe this phenomenon in detail. The theory surely merits further investigation; eventually it may help to account for the shift from Peking to Beijing.

In any event, the palatalization of the velars and many other distinctive attributes of MSM are definitely spreading slowly from the north (where the Altaic peoples reigned supreme for many centuries) to the south. At the present moment, this wave of change has reached the Yangtze. Barring some great political upheaval, at the rate it is now travelling palatalization is likely to pass through Fukien in another century or so and inundate Canton by the end of the 22nd century. Television and other modern communications media are likely to hasten the process dramatically, although isolated islands of immunity will continue to rise above the palatalizing flood long after it washes against the southern borders of China.

It may be of some consolation to us poor benighted souls who insist on Peking over Beijing that we are not alone in the world. Aside from most of the Chinese living south of the Yangtze and many living to the north of that mighty river as well, the Chinese in Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Chinatowns everywhere overwhelmingly vote for Peking instead of Beijing. Other East Asian peoples also clearly opt for the traditional pronunciation. The Vietnamese, for example, say Bắc-kinh and the Koreans Puk-kyŏng. The Japanese say Peking when they attempt what they consider to be a modern pronunciation of the name of the Chinese capital. But if they were to read the two tetragraphs in the manner their forefathers learned to pronounce them, they would say either *hok[u]kei* for supposedly Han dynasty (roughly second century B.I.E. to second century I.E.) sounds (but actually acquired from north Chinese sources during the seventh century, i.e. Tang period) or *hok[u]kyō* for ostensibly

Wu dynasty (222-279 I.E.) sounds (but actually acquired from the Southern Dynasties [Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen] during the fifth and sixth centuries). If pressed to read them in a truly Japanese, non-Sinitic fashion, they would pronounce the two tetragraphs as *kita miyako*.

We should not feel guilty for saying Peking instead of Beijing. It is not because we are uncouth foreign devils that we pronounce the name of the Chinese capital the way we do, but because we have inherited a long tradition shared by virtually the rest of the world. Asking around among my friends from other countries, I find the following usages: Piking (Hindi), Peking (Hebrew), Pekin (Persian), Bīkīn (Arabic), Pekin (Polish), Peking (Czech), Pekino (Italian), Peking (Swedish), Pekín (Spanish), Pekinon (Greek), Pékin (French), Pekin (Russian), and Peking (German). It is obvious that it is not simply because we are perverse that we insist on maintaining the traditional pronunciation which the northern Chinese have themselves given up during the last few centuries.

Peking has been a part of our heritage since at least the time of immortal Milton who wrote

"Of mightiest Empire from the destined Walls
Of *Cambalu*, seat of *Chathaian Can*,
And *Samarchand* by *Oxus*, *Temir's* throne,
To *Paquin* of *Sinaean Kings*...."
(*Paradise Lost*, XI.387-390)

Milton may have learned of Paquin from W. Noel Sainsbury's *Calendar of State Papers for the East Indies* (1513-1629), but the name of the Ming capital had already been introduced to Europe by the Portuguese writer Joao de Barros who mentioned Pequij in a record referring to 1520.

Peking is integral to our culture. A duck by any other name is just not as crispy and unctuous. A dog by any other name is indubitably not as cute and cuddly. A Pleistocene man by any other name is simply not as evocatively mysterious. Our ladies wore pekin and our gentlemen nankeen. Even the students and faculty at China's premier institution of higher education recognize that Peking University is the correct English equivalent of MSM Beijing Daxue. We too should stand firm by Peking until, perhaps, the Northern Chinese start saying New York instead of *Niuyue* and Philadelphia instead of *Feicheng*. By that time, however, there will probably only be one important language left in the world anyway.

Note

1. The Tibetans also considered that administrative offices ought to be constructed on an elevation. Hence many Tibetan words having to do with government buildings and titles begin with the syllable *rtse* which means "top" or "peak." The commanding presence of the Potala and other major architectural edifices of the Tibetan theocracy over the surrounding valleys is tangible evidence of this belief.

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